Why Hast Thou Forsaken Us?
Psalm 22, selected; Psalm 90
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It was my intention today to speak directly to the young people in our midst who have graduated from High School. In my mind this was to be the day for recognizing their achievements, celebrating their accomplishments, and for wishing them the best of life in the future. The sermon for this day had been working in my mind for several weeks and was almost ready to be put on paper. And then early Wednesday morning, innocently turning on the radio to learn the final tabulation of the California Primary, I heard the news.

Everything else paled before the unbelievable events of that and the next day. To stand in the pulpit this morning and ignore the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy would be irrelevant. But this time words do not come easily. Unlike other, similar occasions, this event left a gaping emptiness in its wake. I sensed, in myself and others, no inspiring rededication; no doxology to noble martyrdom - just an empty nothingness. And so, while it is irrelevant not to address this event, it is exceptionally difficult to do so in words that make some semblance of sense.

And yet, perhaps there is an important connection here. Perhaps there is a definite relatedness between this death and the meaning of entering the adult world in 1968. Robert F. Kennedy became, in a way, a symbol of youth. His very style of life exuded a vitality that summed up what is good and hopeful about being young. But beyond that his death last week was the third death - the third brutal assassination of a young man: the third event that will punctuate the 1960's in the annals of history. John F. Kennedy was a young man. Martin Luther King, Jr., was not yet 40 years old. Robert F. Kennedy was 42. The three of them in the past decade had ignited something new in the hearts of American youth. I don't know that we can pin it down in one word. "Involvement?" "Commitment?" "Sacrifice?" "Idealism?" Whatever it was, it became a dominant force in our common life. It expressed itself in the Peace Corps, the Civil Rights Movement, new ferment on college campusses throughout the land. I guess I prefer the word "idealism". These three dead Americans shared a common hope, an idealism about the future of our country, the potential of our people, indeed the destiny of mankind. To the young, in mind and in heart, whether agreeing ideologically or disagreeing, it struck a responsive chord.

But now all three are dead. Senseless violence has cut down the three men who wanted to change even the heart of America. Idealism, three times, has fallen victim to the assassin's bullet. Perhaps that's what it means to be graduating from High School in 1968. Perhaps that defines the kind of world the young are inheriting.

In any case, all of us - graduating seniors, parents, young, old, come with a burden this morning. Fear, grief, sadness, despair, anxiety - perhaps a nameless, empty numbness - it's in the air and in our hearts. and I feel deeply that to ignore it is to be irresponsible.

We've had quite enough of self-flagellation. Communal guilt is a sticky concept which may or may not be relevant. One man pulled a trigger - and it is inevitable that the shame is reflected on all of us. But we all did not do it. I can't align myself with those who would blame America per se because it's just not so.

And yet only the ignorant will deny that "violence is as American as apple pie." H. Rap Brown said that for the wrong reasons, but it is true, nevertheless. Our history is violent: organized crime is uniquely and violently American: the idea that murder is entertaining - in the comic strips, in "Bonnie and Clyde" - is not widely held outside America. Only in America can a man decide to kill his neighbor and then go to K-Mart and purchase a .38 Magnum pistol to do the job.

Perhaps it's an unintended and inevitable legacy of freedom. I don't know. Perhaps it is related to the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. I don't know that, either. That it is real: that it is a sickness: that the recent assassination makes us look at it - I am certain. Violence is a cultural norm, in most cases quite respectable. And until we do something about that we have no real reason to expect

this type of thing to cease.

But even more important than this is that we are, as a nation, afflicted with a deep sense of empty despair. Things seem to be getting out of hand. A deep sadness covers the land - reflected in a second grave in Arlington cemetery. It's a difficult time to think meaningfully about faith.

And yet that is not a new reaction in the long history of humanity. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer: and by night, but find no rest." Those words, so very descriptive of our mood this morning, were written more than 2,500 years ago by the author of the 22nd Psalm. They were invoked by Jesus Christ in his moment of absolute aloneness on the cross.

A man of faith wrote them. A man of greater faith repeated them as he died. They are appropriate today. They reflect the deep faith of Israel, so secure in the loving presence of God. Psalm 22 is an individual lament, a personal outpouring of a man who stood where we are standing today.

Even more relevant perhaps is the 90th Psalm which we read responsively. It is a "communal lament", one of a collection of Psalms used in the Temple when time got tough for the people of God. The specific occasion for the commissioning of this Psalm is unknown: it could have been a disastrous military defeat, or a famine, or a disease that was ravaging the Israelites. In any case, the situation was not a rosy one - and the Psalm gave vent to the probing questions of the people.

Using the poetic idiom the Psalm asks: "What is the meaning of life in light of its brevity?" A series of striking metaphors punctuates the despair: life is like dust that settles for a moment and then is blown away. Life is like a new blade of grass, glistening in morning wetness that fades and wilts and withers away and dies before evening. Life is like a dream, the fleeting, nebulous world of sleep that vanishes as we awake. A watch in the night - 3 hours of watching sheep - that's what life is. And even if it extends past the allotted three score years and ten, its summation is toil and labor and tragedy.

Those who like their religion soft and easy ought not to toy with this Psalm. This is no sentimental exercise in piety: this is no attempt to wave away the sobering realities of life. Rather, it comes to us in absolute integrity - a taut, blunt question thrown in the face of God.

"How long, O Lord?" The same question asked before - "Why hast thou forsaken me?" Today the same questions are asked, the same issues raised, but with a significant difference. Today the lament is raised outside the household of faith. Today those who ask these questions assume that there are no answers; and that the fact of no answers spells either the death of God or the irrelevance of faith. Meanwhile the Church - withdraws more and more to its easy answers of orthodoxy, sealing off eager minds from even raising the issues which disturb a generation. These two Psalms tell us that this is the place for asking: that here, in the sanctuary is the best place of all for lifting up our voices in momentary despair - "My God, why hast thou forsaken us?" It is no sin, on this day, to ask - to admit that there are no easy, pat answers.

That, in the final analysis is the beauty of these two Psalms. They ask the difficult questions - but do not attempt to answer. How much easier, how much more comfortable to have a ready answer. How much easier, how much more comfortable to have a ready response. In fact, as a people, we are neurotically drawn to quick solutions, and easy answers. The great appeal of both religious fundamentalism and political extremism to Americans is precisely at this point. For every question and doubt the fundamentalist has a pat answer buttressed by scripture. The Communist press has already interpreted the assassination as a right wing plot, and the far right will see here yet another manifestation of the leftist conspiracy in our midst.

It's appealing: it's easy, and if there is anything our Judeo-Christian tradition has to say to us on this day, it is that it is wrong. There are no easy answers: there may be no answers at all. The true test of faith is not in having a pious cliche for every exigency, but in being able to stand tall and strong in the face of questions that will not be answered.

That is the posture of courage assumed by the man who wrote these words. But, again, there is a difference. These were not philosophers of nihilism: these were not prophets of gloom who wallowed in despair. Honest, courageous men, not given to sentimentalism - but not fatalists.

Listen to the closing words of the Psalm that began "Why has thou forsaken?" - "Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down." Listen to the opening words of the Psalm which asked "How long, O Lord?" - "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God."

That's the difference. As honest men and women, people with a burden, we are called today to express the despair, the anxiety, the unanswered questions that weigh heavily upon us. But not in a vacuum; not alone; not surrendering to the empty void - but within the whole context of faith. "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God."

That is the good news that reverberates even through the lament of a stricken people. We are free to ask our God "Why hast thou forsaken us?" and then to stand in the thundering silence- because faith tells us that he has not: that he is - that because he is there is always hope, always new life resurrected from death.

"Lord - thou art our dwelling place in all generations" - even this day.

Amen.